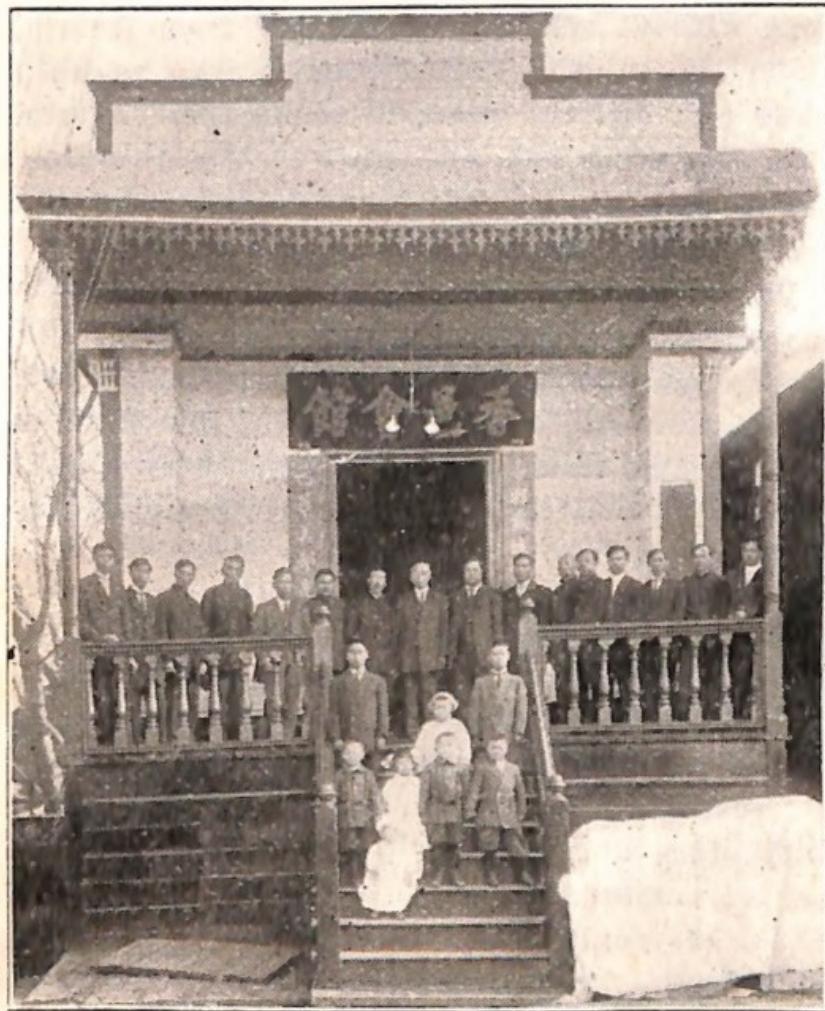


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# Oriental Religions in America

BY KATE DONELSON.

WHEN the tide of immigration raised the question as to whether the United States was able to assimilate so many foreign people with such varied standards of life, certain rules and regulations were enacted by the government in order to control the types of people who



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entered. These regulations govern the physical, economic, and industrial conditions of entrance and citizenship, but our fundamental law of religious liberty precludes restrictions concerning creeds and religious practices. Our very liberty has become our menace. Education and religion are as fundamental to the character-building of the nation as they are to the individual. In a new country like ours, to which the mysterious spell of migration brings hundreds of millions of people from Europe without religious creed, and from Russia, India, Japan, and China, peoples who worship idols and ancient cults, to make their habitation, we must ask and answer the question: What will the introduction of these foreign creeds do for our civilization?

While we may not call the United States a thoroughly Christian country, we cannot fail to recognize that her strength and democratic ideals are built upon the faith of our Puritan fathers and those early pilgrims who sought her shores that they might have liberty of conscience.

It is interesting to know that there are more than fifty different religious organizations in the United States. These include multiplied denominations of Protestant bodies, four large organizations of Catholics, Jews, Unitarians, Universalists, Societies for Ethical Culture, Buddhists, and Theosophists. The total number of communicants of all these religions is 40,515,126 souls. This number increased more than half a million in the year 1917. Thus it is seen that not a third of our people are professors of any creed or faith.

One involuntarily feels that the heathen religions cannot find fertile soil in this great country of liberty, and yet the story of the last dozen years shows a growth of two Buddhist temples per year. There are seventy-four temples for the worship of idols and heathen gods in the United States. There are twenty-four Japanese Buddhist temples on the Pacific Coast, presided over by twenty-five priests. These Buddhist missions claim a membership of ten thousand. The superintendent resides in San Francisco and constantly travels throughout the coast conducting religious campaigns. With the exception of an independent temple in Los Angeles and another in San Jose, the Japanese Buddhist missions are strongly organized. The independent Buddhist temple at Los Angeles, erected at a cost of sixty thousand dollars, has a reported membership of six hundred. The independent mission at San Jose is also a popular organization. It is interesting to know that the Japanese Buddhists alone have one temple in San Francisco with three priests. About the bay in Alameda, Oakland, and Berkeley there are three temples with three priests. At Sacramento there are two; at Stockton, one; at Fresno and vicinity, four; and in Southern California, four. These Japanese Buddhist priests also serve temples in Utah, Oregon, and Washington. In San Francisco, on Webster and Filbert Streets, the Brahman priests of India conduct a Hindu temple which has been largely supported by a woman of our own race.

Since the Pan-American Exposition the leaders of these Buddhist organizations have been most active in this country. Across the street

from our own Mary Helm Hall, in Alameda, Cal., a Buddhist priest has residence, and he has adapted many features of our work to his own service, thus endeavoring to undermine our evangelical work. He took twenty-five children from our Japanese language school two years ago and a few from our Sunday school; but most of these have returned, because they found the teachings of the living Christ more satisfying than theories and dumb idols.

From one who was permitted to enter a California Buddhist temple at the hour of worship we have the following description: "A shrill piping noise, worse than a bagpipe in monotony, pierced the ear, and we hurried to the street corner to discover its source and meaning. We saw the squatting figure of a bareheaded, beggarly looking priest bending over a bonfire of paper. Above him on the wall of the house hung long strips of pink paper covered with Oriental characters. Several stood around alternately reading the placards and blowing into long reedlike instruments, while close by small boys held boxes smoking with burning incense. They were feeding their joss. Turning through a dirty alley, we went into the joss house, where a hideous Buddha idol, six or eight feet tall, sat at the door. We entered a long narrow hall with a row of small idols on each side upon the wall. This led into a square open place with more and larger idols. A group of Chinamen were sitting on benches around the wall. In an interior room there was a gaudily decorated shrine before which several men were performing acts of worship. A number of Chinese lanterns fur-

nished the light, and the air was full of incense and Chinese odor. I felt it difficult to breathe; but the oppression felt by the body was scarcely noticed for the weight that fell upon my spirit. I was startled by the likeness between the leering faces of the idols and the faces of the men who were worshiping. The Psalmist said: 'They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them.' The air seemed fairly to teem with evil spirits whose presence gleamed forth through the eyes of the idols and their makers. My soul fairly staggered with the realization of idolatry as the means whereby the powers of darkness hold in slavery the minds of men, turning them from the worship of the Creator to the creature, from the living God to the graven image unto whom they cried vainly."

Will this idol worship appeal to our Western minds? Will this idolatry of Buddha gain a foothold in Christian America? One needs but to recall how easily the teachings of the Theosophical Society, through its communal life and doctrines of perfection through the transmigration of the soul, has gained popularity here in the last quarter of a century to realize that there is peril for our country in the presence and practice of this heathen worship within its borders. The boundless reverence of the past and the love of the remote which characterize these heathen doctrines hold a fascination for faddists whose imaginations are exalted at the expense of the understanding.

We may not prevent the liberty of religious faith and worship of any people in this country, but we can drive away error and super-

stition by the expulsive power of a new faith built upon a living Christ whose love is able to make men new. The renewed activity of these Brahmans and the people of Buddha challenges us to greater zeal in giving them the living God, the one name whereby they may be saved. They must be saved that the country may be saved. "Our country God's country" must be the slogan of the Church in America.

Again, does not this effort to plant blind and helpless gods in our midst reveal to us the horrors of heathendom? Does it not awaken us to a new sense of the divine commission to bear witness of Him who is Saviour of the world? Did He need to bring these idolatrous people as a vast object lesson and set them down in our midst to arouse us to the knowledge of their needs and our own danger? God help us to take the warning, to go forth in the power of the Spirit to the lands of the Orient to save their Christless millions and to save those who come to this our own land.

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